

## JOHN THE BAPTIZER AND JESUS CHRIST: WHEN SYMBOL MEETS SUBSTANCE

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In his poetic piece, "Conversion," early this century, Andrew Young sets up a conversation between Nicodemus and one of the disciples of Jesus.

Nicodemus: 'Tell me one thing; why do you follow Jesus?'

The Disciple: 'It was because of John the Baptist first.'

Nicodemus: 'But why because of him?'

Disciple: 'One day when we were standing by the Jordan,  
John and. . . myself,  
We saw a man pass by, tall as a spirit;  
He did not see us though he passed quite near;  
Indeed we thought it strange;  
His eyes were open but he looked on nothing;  
And as he passed, John, pointing with his finger,  
Cried—I can hear him cry it now—  
'Behold, the Lamb of God!'

Nicodemus: 'And He, what did He say? What did He do?'

Disciple: 'Nothing; we watched Him slowly climb the hill;  
His shadow fell before Him; it was evening.  
Sometimes He stopped  
To raise His head to the home-flying rooks  
Or greet a countryman with plough on shoulders.'

Nicodemus: 'John said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God?'

Disciple: 'He said so.'

Nicodemus: 'And from that day you followed Him?'

Disciple: 'No, that was afterwards in Galilee.'

Nicodemus: 'But tell me why; why did you follow Him?'

Disciple: 'I think it was our feet that followed Him;

It was our **feet**; our **hearts** were too afraid . . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Following the Lord by feet or by heart could very well depict ultimate choices facing the disciples of Christ in all ages. For example, to the degree that God is transcendent, "wholly other,"<sup>2</sup> and beyond time and space, our knowledge of God even when experiential often nourishes itself through inspired symbolism appealing to human senses and allowing a more eminent understanding of Deity. I am proposing that the utilitarian values of symbolism notwithstanding, the life of the believer often experiences inevitable tension between symbols and their intended significance because symbolic import may not always be inherent in the events or significations themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, given the relative convenience and ease of being grasped and understood and given their practical usefulness, symbols tend to assume primary prominence in the lives of believers and are not easily relinquished even in the face of having reached their "fulfillment" or met their essence. Such a predicament may be described as following God with "feet" rather than with "heart," i.e., clinging to empty symbols long after they have outlived their usefulness.

### Of Symbols, Types, and Representations

Any serious use of the term "symbol" in connection with theological reflection would do well to define boundaries and relationships. What is a symbol? How does symbol compare or contrast with type? Does John the Baptizer qualify as symbol or type? And if either, what does he symbolize or typify? What implications are there for Seventh-day Adventist Christians nearing the twenty first century?

Simply stated for our present consideration, a *symbol*, on the one hand, is "something which stands for or represents something else. The two may have an inherent connection but are not literally equivalent."<sup>4</sup> It helps to understand further that a symbol "suggests meaning rather than stating it" and is "itself a literal object . . . to convey some lesson or truth."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, a *type*

assumes more organic connection with its signification by being a "preordained representative relationship which certain persons, events, and institutions bear to corresponding persons, events, and institutions occurring at a later time in salvation history."<sup>6</sup> A basic assumption of typology declares that a pattern in the redemptive acts of God exists throughout salvation history and designates prefigurement as type and fulfillment as antitype. Furthermore, in summary, traditional understanding of typology comprehends "divinely ordained, detailed OT predictive prefigurations of Jesus Christ and Gospel realities brought about by Him."<sup>7</sup> Albeit that types and symbols have similarities, two important differences must be noted, namely; 1) *Type* usually resembles in one or several aspects the thing it prefigures while a *symbol* serves as a pointer without necessarily bearing outward similarities to that which it points (viz., bread and wine symbolizing the body and blood of Christ in Matthew 26:26-29 or the seven golden lampstands symbolizing the seven churches in Revelation 2:1); and 2) *Type* points forward in time while a *symbol* may precede, proceed simultaneously with, or succeed that which it symbolizes or represents. The symbol, however, partakes of that to which it points. The lion is a symbol of courage because it is courageous. The oak is a symbol of strength because it is strong, etc.

### John as Symbol

With the preceding definitions as backdrop, I am suggesting that John the Baptist be viewed as symbolic rather than typical of the mission and life of Seventh-day Adventists. Although he might be or most certainly is antitype to Elijah (Malachi 4:15; Luke 1:17; Matt 11:13, 14; 17:12, 13), nevertheless, John does not typify Christ though John's divine purpose blossoms and comes to fruition by preparing for and prefacing, without prefiguring, Jesus Christ. Similarly, the relationship between the Baptizer and Seventh-day Adventists eludes typology and rests more on emblemology—a symbolic juxtaposition whereby the call and work of the former analogizes the rise and work of the latter especially with reference to the Second Advent.

Quite consistent, I believe, is the thinking of Ellen White on this symbolic connection according to the following statements:

As a prophet, John was 'to . . . make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' In preparing the way for Christ's first advent, he was a *representative* of those who are to prepare a people for our Lord's second coming.<sup>8</sup>

In this age, just prior to the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, such a work as that of John is to be done. God calls for men who will prepare a people to stand in the great day of the Lord. The message preceding the public ministry of Christ was: 'Repent, publicans and sinners; repent, Pharisees and Sadducees; repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' As a people who believe in Christ's soon appearing, we have a message to bear—'Prepare to meet thy God.' Amos 4:12. Our message must be as direct as was the message of John.<sup>9</sup>

Today, in the spirit and power of Elias and of John the Baptist, messengers of God's appointment are calling the attention of a judgment-bound world to the solemn events soon to take place in connection with the closing hours of probation and the appearance of Christ Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords.<sup>10</sup>

Having John as representative and model of gospel service from the first century, A.D., should prompt us to study his life and labors for possible guidelines in witnessing to Jesus Christ during the waning hours of our nineteenth century when standards and lifestyles are being arraigned before the bar of relevance. What was the emphasis of the message of John? What methodology did he choose to convey that message? How did the standard of his behavior or lifestyle relate to his mission? What can we learn from John's moment of truth, his kind of "crisis theology" situation, his confluence of convictions when all that he preached seemed to have met with meaninglessness and disappointment and urged him to send and inquire of Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20, NIV).

### John Meets Jesus (. . . the Second Time Around)

Dedicated to God as a Nazarite from birth (Luke 1:15), John lived a life subject to the vow of strict abstinence as did Samson (Judges 13:4-7) and Samuel (I Samuel 1:11). His dress sounded the note of ancient prophets (2 Kings 1:8), and his diet consisted of "locusts and wild honey" (Matt 3:4; Mark 1:6) and pure water from

the hills.<sup>11</sup> Wilderness dwelling would characterize his general lifestyle, and from this setting he preached repentance while emerging and standing tall as an effective reformer sent of God to "rebuke the excesses of his time."<sup>12</sup>

The belief that John may have been at one time connected with the Essenes, the Dead Sea Scroll (Qumran) sect, emanates from their both residing in the Judean desert and possessing other similarities. However, similarities notwithstanding, John's role was essentially prophetic, the Qumran sect's role esoteric.

The mission of John as "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord'," (Matt 3:3, NIV) reached its apex at the Jordan River when Jesus submitted to baptism at the hand of John and the approving voice from heaven was heard (Matt. 3:17). With the same outstretched hand subsequently pointing to the Messiah, John would cry, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). What a beautiful blending of two lives in harmonious purposes and divine destinies!

Nevertheless, from this point on in their congruent mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God, John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ appear to travel divergent paths toward identical goals. John, the way of sharp distinction through ruggedness, austerity, unceremonious speech, and social distance—all according to divine plan. Jesus, the way of clear distinctiveness through tact, counterpoise, authoritative speech, and friendliness.

Basic similarities prevail between them to be sure. Both were relatives and from the same biological family (Luke 1:26-45). Both preached repentance (Matt 3:1-2; 4:17). Both suffered for their faith and divine mission (Matt 14:1-12; 17:12; Mark 6:17-29).

Nevertheless, for all their inherent correspondence, John and Jesus are better known for *contrasts* in lifestyles which not a few observers prefer calling contradictions. At best, such contrasts assume veins of tension clearly noted in the Gospels. To begin with, John took the Nazirite vow, but Jesus did not. The disciples of John were known to fast and pray often while those of Jesus were described as eating and drinking (Luke 5:3). The ministerial district of John centered in the Judean desert (Matt 3:1) while that of Christ embraced also cities and towns (Matt 9:35; Luke 13:22). The diet of John restricted itself to "locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6) al-



though food eaten and/or provided by Jesus included corn or grain, fish, bread and wine (Matt 12:1; Luke 24:42; John 21:13; 2:1-10). John dressed in ultra conservative "clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist" (Mark 1:6, NIV) while Jesus wore normal garb of the day (Matt 9:20-21; John 19:23). The lifestyle of John generally appeared not very sociable when at the same time Jesus can easily be characterized as winsome if not gregarious (Matt 11:16-19; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 10:38; 19:5-7; John 12:2).

I am submitting that John's most critical moment of *truth* came when, languishing in Herod's dungeon, he had solitary moments of reflection about his work of fearlessly reproving iniquity and rebuking sin, and he expected Jesus the Messiah to cast down the oppressor, deliver the oppressed, and usher in the Kingdom. Without a doubt, John fulfilled quite well the purpose for which he was called and born, the part he was to play in that first century drama of salvation. His was the rare privilege of announcing, personally introducing and baptizing the promised Messiah, and preaching the need for repentance in preparation for the messianic Kingdom. Most assuredly, as Ellen White summarizes: "The prophet John was the connecting link between the two dispensations. As God's representative, he stood forth to show the relation of the law and prophets to the Christian dispensation. He was the *lesser* light, which was to be followed by a *greater*. The mind of John was illuminated by the Holy Spirit, that he might shed light upon his people; but *no other light* ever has shone or ever *will shine so clearly* upon fallen man as that which emanated from the *teaching and example of Jesus Christ* and His mission had been but dimly understood as typified in the shadowy sacrifices. Even John had not fully comprehended the future, immortal life through the Savior."<sup>13</sup>

So now, in Herod's prison alone with his own thoughts, John meets Jesus for the second time. Their first meeting took place a year earlier on the banks of the Jordan with the mission of the Messiah in prospect. Now much of that mission in the lifetime of the Baptizer is retrospect, allowing him to contrast his purpose and preaching with the unexpected observable outcomes apparent in the life and ministry of Jesus. Can this Jesus of Nazareth, who does not entirely fulfill John's messianic expectations, really be the

Messiah? In answer to this inquiry put to Jesus by way of John's disciples, Jesus had only responded: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: how the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are hearing the good news—and happy is the man who does not find me a stumbling-block" (Luke 7:22-23, NEB). Having received this answer from Christ, an answer denoting "evidence of His divinity. . . in its adaptation to the needs of suffering humanity" as also "His glory. . . in His condescension to our low estate," to John "it was enough."<sup>14</sup> His view of the true meaning of the Kingdom rights itself, and his questionings melt into the higher purposes of God. In this sense, John meets Jesus the *second* time around—through this last word of Jesus he has an experience of personal disclosure, of coming through a maze, a "wilderness" of honest misconceptions and emerging victorious as one who finally sees the more complete truth as it is in Jesus Christ the Lord.

What can we learn today from the John the Baptizer experience? As symbol or representative of Seventh-day Adventists especially in relation to "preparing a people for our Lord's second coming,"<sup>15</sup> John's overall ministry is undoubtedly a worthy model. A closer look, however, at how he practiced certain lifestyle *standards* in the context of his mission of heralding the Christ brings us to an awareness of how standards are sometimes more relative than absolute and more symbolic than substantive.

*Standards* find their purpose in relationship to *principles*. While principles are "universal rules, usually given in the abstract, such as courtesy, obedience, love, equality," standards are "specific applications of these principles."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, principles know no cultural or time boundaries though standards generally vary from culture to culture. Honoring the principles of modesty and temperance, for example, John was led of God to dress in camel hair with a leather belt and subsist on locust and wild honey—symbolic applications utilitarian for a local purpose. That John's symbols were not the *norm* for all persons becomes clear if only you compare him to Christ, his contemporary, who honored identical principles but with a different dress and diet. Yet both John and Jesus

promoted the same spiritual Kingdom. The pattern is set, and we learn particularly two lessons from the John-Jesus portraiture.

First, a given standard at a precise time in history might take on a feature dissimilar to that found in the known lifestyle of Jesus Christ Himself. The prime challenge facing such a standard, as also all standards, nonetheless, is to validate its qualification as the will of God. Even with Christ as the ideal and norm, God might countenance a standard which proceeds along a course differently, in the literal sense, from that which one might normally have visualized for Christ Himself. In the mind of the practitioner or observer of such a standard, a kind of crisis tension understandably surfaces.

Secondly, whatever construct a standard may take in a given generation or culture, be that standard ever so commendable and pragmatic, any tension real or imaginary between that standard and known facts from the life and teachings of Christ must ultimately surrender to Him who is "the way, the truth, and life" (John 14:6).

Inevitably, the reality of the human condition thrusts believers into the fray of having to re-interpret standards following years of attachment. By then, lines of distinction between standards and principles have blurred, and standards themselves are mistaken for principles. Facing pressures to reassess or change, in their critical moment of desperation, the axiomatic moment of an immovable object colliding with an irresistible force, not a few believers cry out like John and his disciples, "Art thou he who should come or should we look for another?" With us as with John, the solution must find its roots in a clearer vision and understanding of the real mission of Christ to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10; Luke 22-23; Isaiah 61:1-2); and then our part in the picture comes more into focus. Like the proverbial "all roads lead to Rome," all religious aspirations, standards and lifestyles must point a clear path to the Savior and His salvific mission or they eventually sink to the level of vacuous traditions—nothing more. The symbols must partake of that to which they point or they are indeed pointless. Advises our prophetess:

Let those who talk of principle as if they would not on any account depart from it be sure that they understand the principles laid down in the Word of God for our guidance. There are some who follow false



principles. Their idea of principle is misleading. Following right principle means the faithful doing of the first four and the last six commandments. In obedience to these divine commands, we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, appropriating all that is embraced in the atonement made on Calvary. Christ will stand by the side of all who receive Him as their Saviour. To them He will give power to become the sons of God.<sup>17</sup>

John as symbol met Jesus the Substance, and that which threatened disaster or impediment resulted in the prophet's attaining fuller knowledge of his God and his place in God's scheme of things. So for the latter day heralds of a coming King, standards and policies can be a way of reflecting our journey with God. Following them, however, in disjunction from God is to follow Jesus Christ with our *feet* rather than with our *hearts*.

### Endnotes

1 James D. Morrison, Editor, *Masterpiece of Religious Verse* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 242.

2 William E. Hordern, *Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 134.

3 *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, X*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966), p. 1285.

4 Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 163.

5 A. Berkeley Mickelson, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 265.

6 Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 184.

7 Richard Davidson, *Typological Structures in the Old and New Testaments*, Unpublished Th.D. dissertation (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrew University Seminary, 1981), p. 111.

8 Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), p. 101. (Emphasis ours.)

9 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church, VIII* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1984), p. 332.

10 Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943), p. 716.

11 Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 102.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 220. (Emphasis ours.)

14 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

16 J. David Newman, "Standards Define Relationships," *Ministry Magazine* (October, 1989), p. 18. Newman discusses with examples of what he considers three levels on which behavioral standards exist, namely: absolute, temporal, and cultural.

17 Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991), p. 270.